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AUTHOR Walker, Laurie
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ABSTRACT

A review of the changes in the English elementary and secondary school curricula in Canada from about 1900 reveals two kinds of language knowledge: knowing "how" (knowledge measuring aspects of language performance) and knowing "that" (factual information about language). Until approximately 1900, the belief existed that knowledge about the principles of language was both necessary for proper speaking and writing and helpful for reading. In short, knowing in the "that" sense was useful in the performance of speaking, writing, and reading, which is knowledge in the "how" sense. This distinction between "knowing about" and "knowing that," although an oversimplification, has been addressed by philosophers and epistemologists. In addition, current language arts instruction is not based on a harmonious consensus about what should be taught and how: progressive approaches include an informational component. Emphasis on knowledge about the principles of language (the "that" sense) existed in Canada until a progressive curriculum, adopted in Alberta in 1937, began a major change as an English-as-use curriculum was introduced. (EL)

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Knowing How and Knowing That: The English Language Arts Curriculum in an Historical Perspective

Laurie Walker

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Knowing How and Knowing That: The English Language Arts Curriculum in an Historical Perspective

Faculty of Education Seminar, University of Lethbridge. Laurie Walker

November 26,1984

I'd like to start on a down-to-earth note so my starting place is that most down-to-earth Canadian town, Sioux Lookout in Northern Ontario. last week a retired teacher let me borrow his daily plan books for the 4 years that he taught grade 6 there, from 1960 to 1964. They record the meticulous daily lessons that he taught his approximately 30 pupils, and carefully pasted into the back are all the tests that they wrote in October, January, March and June.

I studied the questions asked on the 4 English tests. They could be broken down into composition questions, grammar questions, and questions on usage, mechanics and word meaning. Spelling, handwriting, and literature were on different tests. Some of these were what I call<u>knowing how</u> questions. For example:

1. From your Speller, select one of the Let's Write pictures and write the story that it suggests to you. You have to know how to write a story to score the 30 points on that one.
2. Combine each of the following pairs of sentences into a single sentence: The hunters returned with two deer. The deer were tied to their car.
3. Rewrite the following sentences supplying the missing capitals and punctuation.
4. Rewrite the following sentences replacing the underlined words with

more suitable ones. Did you have a nice time at the party?

These questions measure aspects of language performance, although there may or may not be some knowledge about the language system involved in answering them correctly. For example, the punctuation question could call for the application of definitions of periods and question marks. However, even this question could be completed on the basis of an awareness of punctuation gained from the experience of reading and writing rather than on an explicit knowledge of the conventions of written language.

However, the following questions tap a different kind of knowledge, what I'm calling knowing that, or propositional knowledge, or factual information about language.

1. Rewrite the following sentences drawing one line under the subject and two lines under the predicate. During the night the refreshing rain fell.
2. Select the adjectives in the following and rewrite them in columns headed Describing, Pointing out, Telling number, Article.
3. Write short definitions of: assertive sentence, synonym, sentence in natural order.
4. name the six parts of a business letter.

These questions require a knowledge of definitions and the ability to classify various language phenomena. It may be that this knowing that is a prerequisite to knowing how; it may be that it merely helps, or it may be that it is separate and unrelated to performance. That's what usually causes all the fuss.

Incidentally on the 1960-61 tests, there were about 40 points for composition, 20-30 for knowledge about language, and about the same number for usage, mechanics, and word meaning.

There are two analogies that bear on this topic. One comes from an opponent of formal grammar in school programs, J.B. Ballard, whose article was reprinted in the 1921 issue of the Nova Scotia Journal of Education. He said:

"There is no more reason for thinking that the ability to identify the parts of speech affects a child's English than there is for thinking that the ability to identify molars effects the mastication of his food."

The other I heard last week from the same retired teacher I referred to above. He quoted from his English methods instructor from his 1948 emergency training college in Britain. Professor Morland had told his class:

"If you were going to train a mechanic, you would have to teach him the principles of the internal combustion engine. It's exactly the same with language: you have to have the principles or you can't proceed."

I think these two analogies, inexact as they are, sum up two opposing points of view of what kind of curriculum experiences in language arts students need in order to achieve proper command of the English language. Ballard's comparison between chewing and talking is not accurate because language is not an instinctive human activity: you don't die if you don't talk as my own survival of a British grammar

school education attests to. But Morland's equating language with car engine maintenance is no more accurate beceuse language is a pervasive part of most children's environment from the earliest age, and children are engaged in exploration of oral language in all their years before schooling starts, most achieving startling sophistication in pronunciation, vocabulary, syntax, and pragmatics by the time they are six years old without any conscious understanding of the rules or principles that linguists spend academic lifetimes unravelling. This manipulation of the language, while it may fall short of command, is far more sophisticated than the mechanic's knowledge of starter motors, carburettors, and pistons. In other words, this analogy fails because the principles of language can be acquired in an unconscious sense, but nevertheless in a very functional sense, through use, whereas it's doubtful if you'd get very far with an unconscious aproach to the automobile engine.

Let me refer to some more examples from the English language arts curriculum. A major concern in writing is with the sentence. In elementary grades children often learn that sentences are of four kinds: declarative, interrogative, imperative, or exclamatory. They may learn that a sentence represents a complete thought, that it consists of a subject and a predicate, and that it can be simple, compound or complex, that it can be in the active or the passive voice, and they used to learn that its mood could be indicative or the dreaded subjunctive of which there were six uses, one of which was the conditional -- if I were a rich man..... . In the old days children would spend a lot of time committing these terms and their definitions to memory, and a lot of time on parsing and analyzing sentences to find examples of these categories. The stated rationale up to about 1900 was

that this kind of explicit, conscious knowledge about the principles of language was necessary to proper speaking and writing and that it was helpful for reading. By about that time this assertion was being modified to the weaker claim that although a knowledge of the principles was neither sufficient nor necessary for good usage, you should still learn formal grammar because it would help you distinguish between correct and incorrect forms. In other words, formal propositional knowledge about language, knowing in the "that" sense of this talk, was useful in the performance of speaking, writing, and reading, which is knowledge in the "how" sense.

Some people deny this connection. James Moffett, for example, recommends that in teaching children to overcome sentence errors in their writing--run-on sentences and sentence fragments, for example (by the way modern writers use deliberately a lot of run-on sentences and sentence fragments--Read John Updike), notions like "a sentence is a complete thought" are not useful. He suggests that children's attention be focussed on the intonation patterns of spoken sentences, having them note where pauses and voice lowering occur and showing them how to punctuate accordingly. The rationale is that children already know in an unconscious but functional way how sentences work in speech and that you build written performance onto this existing knowledge, which is quite respectable pedagogy.

One can find other examples of the information approach in early reading programs: sometimes children are taught the phonics classification system: short vowels, long vowels, consonant blends, consonant digraphs, vowel digraphs, vowel diphthongs. Sometimes they are taught explicit rules such as "When two little vowels go walking

the first one does the talking and says its own name." More often kids are taught merely how to pronounce these elements, and sometimes kids learn to read entirely without phonics instruction.

In literature figures of speech sometimes come in for a lot of scrutiny. Definitions of simile, metaphor, personification, synecdoche, oxymoran, etc., take up a lot of time. I found an old Nova Scotia literature text, called Longer Narrative Poems, in a junk shop. It had been an authorized text in Nova Scotia high schools around 1900. There was a poem by John Greenleaf Whittier called The Storm. It went on and on for page after page in the following vein, describing the homestead in the wake of a storm:

".....strange domes and towers
Rose up where sty or corn crib stood,
Or garden wall or belt of wood;
A smooth white mound the brush pile showed,
A fenceless drift what once was road;
The bridle post an old man sat
With loose-flung coat and high cocked hat;
The well curb had a Chinese roof;
And even the long sweep, high aloof,
In its slant splendor seemed to tell
Of Pisa's leaning miracle.

Well, Miss Pauline Jackson to whom this junk shop copy had belonged had marked in pencil all the figures of speech in this poem. I think that the poem was on the curriculum, not for its literary merit but because it was a goldmine of figures of speech that high school kids could be

kept busy mining. The poem was reprinted in the 1907 Nova Scotia Readers.

This dichotomy between knowing about, or knowing that, and knowing how is, like all dichotomies, an oversimplification. If I didn't say that, I'm sure it would come up in the discussion. It would be impossible to run a language arts class that was entirely focussed on language as skill and performance without some consideration of language as artifact or object of knowledge. When you are discussing a piece of writing with its young author, it's hard to avoid words like sentence, noun, verb and so on which make up the metalanguage of the classroom. Grammatical terminology doesn't consist of four-letter words in anybody's program. Likewise, grammarians of the old school would expect students to use their knowledge of grammar in fixing up sentences and in composition. So we must be talking in terms of a continuum rather than a dichotomy, identifying programs as being located at some point on the line according to the degree of emphasis that is placed on the explicit study of linguistic phenomena, either for its own sake, in which case it would show up as examination questions on grammar, or as an assumed enabling objective in language performance that would be assessed directly without questions on grammar.

Let me also point out that this distinction between knowledge about and knowing how has been addressed by philosophers and epistemologists. Gilbert Ryle in 1949 was the first to point out the difference between the two kinds of knowing in his discussion of what he called the "intellectualist legend", which claims that any intellectual operation must be preceded by an intellectual acknowledgement of the rules or criteria that direct it. In its vernacular form this argument states that a person has to think about what he is doing, otherwise he would

not be able to do it well. Ryle used telling and getting jokes by people who know nothing of the formal rules and principles of humour as examples where this two-step process is not necessary. He also pointed out that one can think successfully without a propositional knowledge of Aristotle's rules of correct reasoning. He acknowledged that successful performance can be based on deductive learning of rules as in chess; but he pointed out it was possible to learn to play chess inductively by observing the play of others. Ryle applied his argument to language by pointing out that it was possible for a non-native speaker of English to have a better knowledge of English grammar than a native speaker without being able to speak the language as proficiently.

Polanyi discussed the value of knowledge of what he called the "rules of art" in the skilled performance of an art. Rules of art, he said, can be useful but they do not determine the practice of an art; they are maxims, which can serve as a guide to an art only if they are integrated into the practical knowledge of the art; they cannot replace this knowledge. Polanyi gave everyday examples such as swimmers who don't know the physical laws of flotation, and bicyclists who don't know the physics of equilibrium.

Scheffler followed Ryle distinguishing propositional from procedural knowledge. He said that a person might have all the relevant information concerning some skill without having the skill itself, and conversely, he might be skilled without having any given piece of information concerning the skill in question, although it is unlikely he would lack all relevant information.

Thus, it would be fair to say that the traditional English language arts curriculum, which placed such a heavy emphasis on information about language, was not founded on any secure relationship between mastery of that information and enhanced linguistic competence. The empirical research evidence was not reasuring either. There is,of course, the possibility that enhanced performance was not the point, although it was claimed to be at least part of it. Related to 19th century psychology, was the value of grammar as mental discipline, as a strenuous exercise of the faculties of reason and memory. As an English schoolmaster said, "once you interest a boy in a subject it loses half of its disciplinary value." There was little chance that the formal grammar of the 19th century classroom would have been diminished in value because of any untoward outbreak of interest.

Before I try to put some historical perspective on this, as the title promises, I'd like to just try to make sure that I've been clear enough on the significance of this distinctiuion between the two kinds of language knowing. To use another oversimplified dichotomy, I think that language arts instruction in 1984 is by no means based on an harmonious consensus about what should be taught and how. Progressive approaches (which is rather a self-serving term) emphasize language as performance. Most provincial curriculum guides in Canada are progressive in this respect. Conservative approaches (a term that progressives tend to use) include more of an informational component, believing that things like grammatical classifications are fundamental prerequisites for competent speaking, reading and writing. It's my impression, from both formal surveys in Nova Scotia and informal observation on a wider basis, that many classroom programs are somewhat less progressive than provincial curriculum guides recommend. Moreover,

I think that curriculum development in English language arts gets caught up in this issue, when progressive developers and conservative teachers fail to communicate clearly because they subscribe to different sets of assumptions about these two kinds of knowledge in language learning that don't always get spelled out in the debates.

My feeling is that English language arts has inherited curriculum rituals from the 19th century. Originating in Victorian theories of language and learning, and in a social class system that put great value in linguistic propriety, these rituals have survived through the 20th century even though the theories and social system that gave rise to them have, I think, disappeared. Last year in the seminar I gave I discussed one hypothesized feature of these rituals, the teacher's role as linguistic police officer defending English as a cultural asset from the vandalism of illiterate speakers, which failed to keep pace with liberalizing attitudes to language which I called the rehabilitation of the vernacular. The hypothesis that I'd like to deal with for the remainder of this presentation is that the information English language arts curriculum that survives to what some consider to be an excessive degree, is a part of this same ritual. Rather than supporting the hypothesis, however, I merely want to document the extent to which English teachers were preoccupied with information about language phenomena in the early years of this century. I'll use Alberta and Nova Scotia examples.

In 1906 the Alberta Course of Studies laid out the curriculum for Standard 5, the final year of elementary school equivalent to grade 8. Under reading, candidates who would present themselves for the provincial examination for this year were to have a general knowledge

of the subject matter of all the prose selections in the New Canadian Reader, Book 5. For literature they were required to have an intelligent comprehension of and familiarity with a list of selections from the same reader with memorization of the finest passages. For grammar the laconic requirement was an intelligent comprehension of Goggin's New Elementary Grammar. This text, by the former Superintendent of the North West Territories, was retained by the new provincial Department for the Alberta jurisdiction carved out of the Northwest Territories and seems to have been authorized until about 1912.

The grammar examination that tested that intelligent comprehension included the following questions:

1. Analyze fully, showing clearly the kind and relation of the subordinate clauses, the following passage:

"On the top of the windmill, of which the solid tower is still to be seen on the ridge overhanging the field, the king, who had his head quite bare, remained in absorbed silence, whilst the young Prince, who had been knighted a month before, went forward with his companions in arms into the thickest of the fray."

After you had earned the 16 points for that question, for 16 more you could proceed to classify and state the relation of the phrases and certain italicized parts. Then, for 10 points, you could write sentences using the words "fan, above, hand", and that with the value of as many different parts of speech as possible. To ensure you weren't just memorizing Goggin, you had to name the parts of speech in each case. Then for seven points you were to name the principal parts of the

verb, say why they were called principal parts, and then give the principal parts of: "lie, lay, catch, run, and be".

For 12 more points you could then write out the first person, plural number, active voice of (1) the present imperfect, (11) the past indefinite, (111) the past definite, (iv) the future imperfect of the verbs destroy and give.

By my calculations, 82 per cent of the points on that exam were for information about the rules and classifications of English grammar. The other points were for questions about correct usage. There was a separate composition and a separate examination on spelling. The composition exam required a short composition on some familiar subject chosen from the course prescribed in reading.

In 1914 the course of study for grade 9 grammar was stated as a general knowledge of chapters 1-8 of the prescribed text, general and detailed analysis of simple passages; determining the grammatical values of words. The text was the Ontario High School English Grammar, and it is interesting to note that the names of the verb tenses had changed from those that Goggin had used. This was also the grade 10 text. For this grade it was a more thorough study of the chapters prescribed for grade 9 plus a general knowledge of chapters 9-16.

It's interesting the extent to which language study was the study of texts. There seemed to be no apologies for this approach to curriculum. I found in looking at the Nova Scotia record that examination questions were sometimes worded in such a way that required regurgitation of information from textbooks. 1913 Grade 12 English: Give the substance

of Lounsbury's remarks on the future of the English tongue. Let me just slip in a quotation from this Lounsbury. In 1908 he said:

No one who is interested in the subject of language can have failed to be struck with the prevalence of complaints about the corruption which is overtaking our own speech. Reference to it turns up not infrequently in books; discussion of it forms the staple of articles submitted to magazines, and of numerous letters written to newspapers...

There seems to have been in every period of the past, as there is now, a distinct apprehension in the minds of many worthy persons that the English tongue is always in the condition approaching collapse.... These foretellers of calamity we have always had with us; it is in every way possible that we shall always have them."

How right he was, so far anyways. I don't think that was an answer to the Nova Scotia grade 12 exam question though.

On the same exam another question quizzed students on their other text, Bradley's Making of English. How, they were asked, according to Bradley, may the attributive use of the English noun be described grammatically?

The effect of this approach on English teaching can be inferred from a 1935 report in the Nova Scotia Journal of Education when the examiners commented on the performance of that year's crop of grade 12 students on the provincial exams. Question 2 on that exam asked candidates to give an account of the development of the auxiliary uses of "to be" and "to do". Bradley devoted 4 pages to this topic. The examiners reported

that question 2 was not a popular question, and that when it was attempted the answers left much to be desired. Whereas the question asked for an account of the development of the auxiliary uses of to be and to do, frequently there was a long treatise on the uses of shall and will or on the value of auxiliaries in general. Some candidates gave infinitives as examples of auxiliaries.

On the face of it this seems rather odd. But if you look at Bradley you find that the section on to be and to do is preceded by a general account of auxiliaries and immediately followed by a section on shall and will. These hapless candidates, I think, had cued into the wrong section of their memories, one of the pitfalls of rote memorization, as I recall from my own fifth year studies of Virgil. I think this stuff from Bradley made as much sense to these young Nova Scotians as the Latin did to me so they memorized the sections of the text that their teachers thought had a good chance of coming up on the provincial.

A retired teacher in Nova Scotia whom I interviewed, said that she used to take all the old grade 12 exams she could find, spread them out on her bed and tried to discover the pattern of questions. Then she used to drill her grade 12s in that miscellaneous school In Wallace, Nova Scotia in the late 20s on the topics she thought had the best odds.

A 1930 examiner's comment said that in that year one Nova Scotia examination centre returned 20 identical answers to a question on the character of Lady McBeth. I guess that teacher picked the favourite that year.

I came across an extreme example of this information approach to

English in the New Brunswick record. In 1870 Inspector Morrison visited a school in Northumberland County. He observed a reading lesson with a group of 8-12 year-olds who were working in the second book of the Irish Readers. The selection being read included these words: "The country where you, children, live is called Ireland. Both halves of the world contains many countries. We live in the east half, in Europe." When the teacher finished the lesson, taught in the normal manner, the Inspector decided to ask the children some questions. He found, as he suspected, that the these little New Brunswickers actually thought that they lived in Ireland. Morrison was a bit of a curriculum critic, especially in the area of textbooks, and he went on to say in his report, "Now it is bad enough to teach little Frenchmen that St. Andrews is twice the city that Fredericton is; but to teach young Bluenoses that they live in Ireland is drawing too largely upon our good nature."

I have not yet got the history that lies between these extreme forms of the information English curriculum up to the 1930s and the present-day curriculum straightened in my own mind. I do know that the Bradley text survived in Nova Scotia util the 1950s and that a junior high level grammar text in the old tradition of Goggin and Lang was used in that province until after World War 11. In Alberta that same text, Cowperthwaite, Marshall and Sullivan, was delisted in about 1937 as a progressive curriculum was adopted in this province and, under the leadership of H.C. Newland, an English-as-use curriculum was introduced. Incidentally the Cowperthwaite text was used as an English methods text in the Calgary Normal School in 1929. My informant on that, Lorne Blackbourne, used the Ontario High School English Grammar as a grade 11 text when he taught in Picture Butte in the early

thirties.

The former Deputy Minister of Education for Alberta, T.C. Byrne, told me that he worked on a revised grade 12 English examination with D. M. Sullivan and Professor Salter in the mid-forties. This exam moved away from the content approach and required students to apply skills to sight unseen passages, which made them a measure of abilities in English rather than of recalled information. I have not been able to find copies of these exams yet; archival instincts in Alberta Education seem to have been a recent impulse. Mr. Blackbourne recalled that English teachers in the Lethbridge area had been ready to hang the members of this revision committee when the new style exams came out because they didn't know how to prepare their students for them.

It's also interesting to see that amidst the progressive English as use curriculum guides that Alberta was issuing in the late 30s and 40s, there appeared in 1940 an appendix to the intermediate English guide called a supplementary list of grammar exercises. The document said that in the view of many experienced teachers the new text for English (Junior English Activities) brought in from the United States, the source of most of Alberta's progressive inspirations at this time, did not include enough practice in grammar, and that these drills were to meet this deficit. It sounds very much as if there were a strong reaction to the new thrust in English that the idealists in Edmonton were forced to acknowledge.

In view of the new Alberta achievement tests, which include reading measures on sight unseen passages, this controversy in the late thirties between English as knowledge about language and literature,

and English as skilled performance, or, in other words, knowing that versus knowing how, may be instructive.

In the interests of a resounding ending I'd like to quote from the back cover of a copy of Goggin's grammar, the one used in the early years of this century. This poem was pencilled in by E.G.L:

Life is real, life is earnest,
And it might be made sublime,
If we were not kept so busy
Studying grammar all the time.
Everyone is dead who wrote it,
Everyone is dead who spoke it,
Everyone must die who learns it,
Happy Death! we think he earns it.

Some with the initials D.E.L. had written under that:

Pretty one, I hope you know
This is from your little beau.

END

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